

ART FRONT

APRIL, 1936

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Helen West Heller, Project Artist

CALL FOR AN EASTERN CONVENTION
THE ABSTRACT SHOW • GOVERNMENT IN ART

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

To meet the general call for information about the New York Artists' Union, the ART FRONT has established this department as a permanent feature of the magazine. It will be under the auspices of the National Correspondence Committee of the New York Artists' Union. It will contain information given in answer to the numerous questions asked about the organizational problems of organizing artists' groups on an economic basis, the artistic standards of the new organizations and particular local problems of each group. It will also feature articles and correspondence from artists, artists' organizations and affiliated groups throughout the country.

TO all artists and artists' organizations in New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and Washington, D. C.

On May 8th, 9th, and 10th a convention will be held to deal with the cultural and economic problems of artists, on a trade union basis.

This convention will mark the official birth of a national organization of Artists' Unions. At the time of this Eastern District convention, the Artists' Unions of the Middle West are to conduct their regional convention. Together, these two conventions will give rise to the Artists' Unions of America.

The need for organization has been increasingly understood by artists, especially by artists in already organized groups and Artists' Unions all over the country. The conventions should lay the basis for national action to secure economic benefits for all professional artists, regardless of their school of art or aesthetics.

One of the chief topics of discussion at the Convention will be the Federal Art Projects, and the appropriate program of action to ensure their continuation and extension on a national scale with trade union wages and conditions. The projects are officially scheduled to end on July 1st; later reports set May 15th as closing date; and, at time of writing threats of immediate cutting down have been published by the Admin-

istration. Action by this convention will unify the fight to extend the projects and to bring into being a permanent project.

The program will also include a full discussion of the public use of art in the decoration in public buildings and the teaching of art to millions of children and adults by artists. The problems of further public use of art works in new outlets and proper distribution of easel paintings, lithos, etc., will also be considered.

The convention will define and clarify the policy of the Artists' Unions in respect to qualifications for membership, art students, open air shows, commercial artists, etc. Experiences will be exchanged and solutions of organizational difficulties will be discussed.

Artists' Unions are asked to make contact with other art organizations in their vicinity interested in the economic problems of the artists, and to invite them to send delegates to this convention. It is our desire that this convention should represent as many organized artists as possible, and we must procure the participation of all organizations.

Arrange and call membership meetings as soon as possible to discuss this convention and the election of delegates.

The success of the Eastern District Convention depends upon the immediate and full support of the Artists' Unions and their delegates.

EASTERN CONVENTION

TO All Artists' Organizations, Groups and Artists Unions in the Eastern District of the United States of America, concerned with the economic security of artists:

You are hereby invited to send delegates to the first Eastern District Convention of Artists' Unions to be held in New York City on May 8th, 9th, 10th.

The objectives of this convention are the formation of a National Artists' Union organization; coordination and planning of programs and activities that will work for the protection and betterment of the artists' economic interests;

(Continued on page 15)

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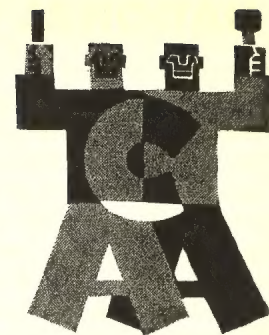
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ART FRONT

APRIL 1936



THE RENTAL POLICY IN ACTION

AS ART FRONT goes to press the Carnegie show is being turned down by the artists. Eight members of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers have refused to send their paintings to the annual exhibition in Autumn. They are Max Weber, Henry Schnakenberg, Joe Jones, Reginald Marsh, Niles Spencer, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Arnold Blanch and Peter Blume.

They have declined because the wealthy Carnegie Institute refuses to pay the meagre fee of one per cent of the price of the paintings submitted to the invited artists. It prefers to risk losing its prestige rather than grant this small demand of the artists who have made its exhibitions famous everywhere.

We greet these artists in their bold support of the organized movement for rentals. If all artists support the rental policy with the same rigor its success is assured.

HARLEM HOSPITAL MURALS

A GROUP of Negro artists employed on the Federal Art Projects were assigned to design murals for the walls of Harlem Hospital, located in the heart of the largest Negro community in the world. The sketches were approved by the Municipal Art Commission and by the W.P.A. Art Projects administration. They were then sent to Lawrence T. Dermondy, Superintendent of the hospital before work on the walls was actually undertaken.

To the amazement of the artists as well as the administrative project officials, Mr. Dermondy, the least qualified person to judge the quality of the work, from an artistic as well as from a social viewpoint, rejected the works of four of the Negro artists on the following grounds; all of

which are in keeping with a discriminatory policy and with Mr. Dermondy's position of trust in Harlem Hospital:

1. Too much Negro subject matter.
2. Negroes may not form the greater part of the community twenty-five years hence.
3. The Negroes in the community would object to Negro subject matter in the murals.
4. His hospital is not a Negro institution and should not be singled out for treatment with Negro subject matter.

The circumstances that a group of four white artists, using totally white subject matter, were endorsed by Dermondy, makes his arguments, if such they be, just so much weaker.

Thus far, Dermondy has referred the matter to his chief, Dr. Goldwater, Commissioner of Hospitals (who had to be forced to admit Negro internes in Queens County Hospital by a mass movement organized by the Committee for Equal Opportunities of that borough in 1935). The latter is referring the matter to a committee of citizens. The W.P.A. Art Administration has been compelled to promise to send white assistance to help the Negro designers in the actual painting of the murals and to send Negro artists to project locations other than in Harlem.

The Artists' Union, along with the Harlem Artists' Guild and the Joint Conference against Discriminatory Practices, is opposed to any form of segregation or discrimination and recognizes that Negro artists, continually faced with these problems must be supported to the limit in their fight for economic, political and social equality as well as cultural expression.

The fight for these special demands for the Negro artists must be placed in the forefront of the general struggle for higher wages, permanent W.P.A. Projects and freedom of expression.

THE 40,000 LAY-OFF THREAT

ONCE again the Administration threatens its workers with dismissal. According to Victor Ridder, local W.P.A. Administrator, 40,000 are to be laid off in New York City by June 30th, with 10,000 to go this month. Throughout the country 320,000 are to be thrown back into unemployment, hunger, and despair.

No reason is given for the action. Evidently the Government has decided to economize. It has been caused to bow before just those "forces of entrenched greed" which President Roosevelt mentioned with such contempt a while ago. Hundreds of thousands are to be delivered to misery and humiliation in order that the Democratic nomination may proceed without too much noise from the reactionaries.

Our local administrator, now known as "Get Rid of Ridder", since his frustrated attempt to fire 20,000 workers two months ago, has added his touch of morality to this rotten deal. No projects will be entirely abolished. "We will force a few people out everywhere," he says. The "shirkers," "listless ones," "those who have shown no interest in their work," these will go first. Also, the non-relief employees will be dropped before others. Such hypocrisy deceives no one. These wholesale discoveries of "shirkers" are always made coincidentally with orders from above. Employees who have never given their supervisors cause for complaint and who have always performed excellent service are suddenly found to be officially unable to work. Not their supervisors but the administrator finds them so. The supervisors are told to develop Administration eyes and they too will find incompetents.

As to the dismissal of employees hired on a non-relief basis, Ridder knows that the fact that they were not on the relief

rolls does not at all mean that they are not in need. In fact, they were made to sign certificates stating they were in need before they could be taken on. Their need is equal to that of all other workers on W.P.A. and we cannot allow any attempt to separate them from the rest.

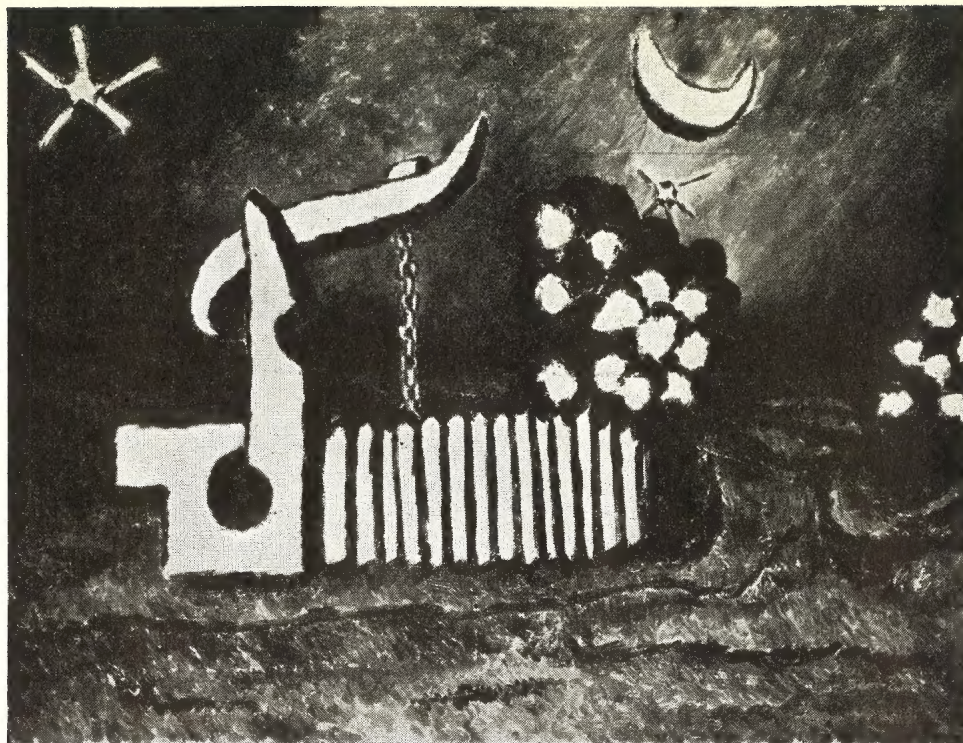
The Artists' Union will be vigilant to see that not one of its members suffers from the irresponsible order of the Administration. The Union knows that its members have done praiseworthy work on the projects and it will not tolerate the firing of workers without just cause. It will back the actions of all other groups of workers to resist the miserable "economy" of Washington.

But we must warn those artists, many of them of non-relief status, who have not taken seriously enough the need for organization and who have not joined or attended the meetings of the Union. They are in grave danger of losing their short-term security and no isolated effort will help them to regain it. Only solidarity with all the other artists organized in the Union can insure their jobs. The Union will fight for them, but it must have their support to do so.

MAN OR BEAST

ONE of the innumerable comic battles between the philistine mind and modern art was staged in the arena of the U.S. Customs some years ago, in this case with the Tariff Law as the successful contender for a filigreed dunce-cap. The occasion was a lawsuit brought by customs officials against the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, providing considerable amusement to the art-interested section of the American public, and considerable amazement to a similar public in Europe, where such things apparently don't happen. Mr. Brancusi had brought some of his pieces to this country for exhibition, and had naturally declared them as works of art. The Customs Bureau promptly started proceedings against him, claiming that, in order to avoid paying an import tax on raw materials, he had falsely declared his bronzes and marbles as works of art—these being tax-free. One of the pieces in question was his famous "Bird in Flight". The officials made an example of it and, to prove their point, rose to the sublime heights of philistinism with the argument—"Mr. Brancusi claims that this object represents a bird. If you met such a bird while out hunting, would you shoot at it?"

But that was long ago. People nowadays are more tolerant and intelligent about modern art—or seem to be. How much more amazing is it then when we open the *N. Y. Times* of February 22nd



The Well

Ben-Zion

Project Teacher

and find that the history of this stupidity has repeated itself. Among the one hundred and fifty paintings, constructions and sculptures which the Museum of modern Art borrowed in Europe for its current exhibition of cubist and abstract art, the customs officials balked at nineteen pieces of abstract sculpture. The pieces could not enter as art and would have to come in under some other classification. As the time was limited, the only recourse open to the museum was to post a very large bond and declare the sculpture under another category.

It should be explained here perhaps that, although artists and critics have been wrangling for centuries over what is and is not art, the Tariff Law has very simply answered the question in its own inimitable way. Sculpture is art only when it resembles the human or some animal form. Thus these nineteen sculptures are not art, and Congress, together with the customs inspector, has become the arbiter on esthetics and the expert on art.

It's very funny, of course, but it has its serious aspect, too. For one thing the occurrence is indicative of the fog-headed official attitude toward modern art, or for that matter any other manifestation of freedom of thought, which might conceivably prove disturbing to a smug inertia of ideas. It will be remembered that this type of mind sits in judgment over public art, in full control of its choice and the appropriations necessary for it. And for that reason primarily American public art is what it is.

Specifically, this case is important to us because of its obstructive effect on free exhibitions. Exhibitions as stimulating and comprehensive as this one are very important to us as artists and to the public at large. We have too few of them as it is. And if the Government, through its enforcement of such an outmoded law, is going to create delays and require the posting of outrageously large bonds when works of art are borrowed from abroad, the museums will certainly be discouraged from holding such exhibitions.

Fortunately, the Museum of Modern Art is not taking the matter without a murmur, but together with some one hundred other museums throughout the country is fighting to have the present law amended so that acknowledged experts on art can be consulted in such matters. Certainly such judgments on art cannot be left to politicians and customs inspectors. And it might also be a good thing if their fight were broadened a bit to include consultations on public works of art.

"FRIEND OF ART"

PEYTON BOSWELL is, apparently, one of those "friends of Art" who have had so much to say about the production and disposal of works of art in America. These "friends," out of their extreme devotion to Art, tend to develop a type-philosophy whose major premise is: any sacrifice is worth while, provided it produces masterpieces. That is to say, of course, any sacrifice on the part of the

artist. The "friends of Art" are always thinking in terms of masterpieces, and are always solving the problems of the living artists in terms of "starving genius." That Van Gogh went mad, Modigliani starved, Pascin committed suicide, that the whole history of art during the past century is studded with headstones of tragedy for artists, is used by these friends of art as an argument in favor of more suicides, more starvation, more madness—because whatever happens to the artist, a masterpiece is always usable by "friends of Art" for commissions, reproductions in fancy magazines, and gossip articles.

Peyton Boswell is President and Editor of *Art Digest*; Peyton Boswell, Jr. is Treasurer and Associate Editor of *Art Digest*; Helen Boswell is Assistant Editor of *Art Digest*. Obviously, it is likely to be a sad day for the Boswell dynasty when the artists of America themselves, through their own organizations, succeed in gaining control of the conditions under which paintings are made and distributed. Already today thousands of artists are engaged in activities in which the Peyton Boswells have no place. This direction of events fills Mr. Peyton Boswell with justifiable alarm.

He, therefore, opens the March *Art Digest* with a rambling, incoherent, illiterate editorial, filled from top to bottom with misrepresentations, errors, and clichés, frantically aimed to discredit the Artists' Union and the whole idea of artist-unionization. Starting with a misquotation

of Heywood Broun's address at the American Artists' Congress, he falsely asserts that the Congress was sponsored by the Artists' Union, "a radical organization." After referring to the "frank, Communistic leanings" of the Artists' Union, he proceeds to an assault against the idea of unionization itself as inconsistent with individuality. He winds up by mentioning the names of a dozen masters of past centuries, and inquires if they found it necessary to join unions.

Peyton Boswell calls his article (which, incidentally, is not a work of genius) "Centaur or Mule"; the mules are, of course, those unindividual, insensitive, third or fourth rate artists who are able to tolerate the restraints of organization, and who prove by that fact alone that they are not "geniuses"; the centaurs are—well, Mr. Peyton Boswell quotes a letter from a Henri de Kruif, who believes that "true artists do not herd well" and who brings up the centaur subject to show how the soaring individualist ought to conceive himself.

We have no way of knowing whether or not Mr. de Kruif is really part horse—but that he has a great deal to learn about the activities of artists during the past few years is indisputable.

Nor will it do these people any good to remind us again and again that Praxiteles and Michelangelo got along without artists' unions. They got along without railroad trains and tooth paste, too, and they even got along without the Boswell family. The Artists' Union evolved out

of the economic conditions of modern times and because of those conditions. We could give plenty of arguments to refute Mr. Boswell's notion of the contradiction between organization and individuality. But more significant than any arguments is the massive experience of the Artists' Union and of its thousands of members all over the country who have found their union the only means for defending their right to live and to produce. As the editor of a news-digest of art, it was the duty of Mr. Peyton Boswell to study the experience of the Artists' Union before editorializing in a reckless and misinformed manner about its policies and accomplishments.

IRVING DIENER

The news of Irving Diener's death was received at the time the March *ART FRONT* went to press. We, therefore, found it impossible to express the shock and regret we experienced at the sudden loss of our friend and co-editor.

Irving Diener was an editor of *ART FRONT* since its first day. For many issues he performed alone the difficult and ungrateful task of business and circulation manager. The deep concern, loyalty and intelligence which he bestowed upon the growth and progress of *ART FRONT* were of major importance for its success.

In our efforts to continue the issuance of *ART FRONT*, in our talks in the Union, and in our personal lives, we feel continually the loss of our friend and co-worker Irving Diener.

ABSTRACT ART AT THE MODERN MUSEUM

by Balcomb Greene

THE exhibition now at the Museum of Modern Art traces the development of cubism and abstract art, and indicates their influence upon the practical arts. The material on view includes painting, sculpture, architecture and furniture, photography, posters, typography, films and theatre designs. With an historical development so well presented, our interest is less in the intensity and quality of individual "art" expressions than in deciding what the function of the artist in society may be.

The arrangement of the show, starting with samples of cubist pictures on the first floor, and passing to the fourth floor where the completely abstract paintings and the "practical art" by-products of abstractionism have been shown us, is calculated to pose certain questions for the visitor. There is the old one as to how modern art ever got started, the equally hoary question as to what the effort was mainly, then the question which is an-

swered with more difficulty—why did modern art culminate in the abstract?

To answer these questions there is no substitute for looking long at such exhibitions as the present one. Yet even the novice will see that, from the first to the top floor, there has been a sort of logical progression. By "logical" we do not mean that each successive movement can be drawn from the previous one as neatly as a rabbit from a hat. What is apparent is that the cubists made devilishly complex patterns which were distortions of people, landscapes and objects. These same artists later, abetted by newcomers, gave up representing objects. Each artist made this change in such an individual way that the purposes look different. One of the most common of tendencies was toward simplification. The usual way for the artist to simplify, get his work under control and make it distinctive was to limit himself to a type of form or shape and relationship. Delaunay and the or-

phists, whatever their theories were, reduced painting to brilliant pattern-making. Whether their pictures moved people or not, they weren't confusing. After them the suprematists, led by the Russian Malevich in 1913, limited themselves to simple geometric forms, fewer forms but usually more varied than the little blurred areas that the orphists began using a year earlier. Leger and Ozenfant are largely responsible for the first pictures which achieved a machine movement. Looking at their pictures of this date, the eye performs a pleasant mechanical journey, usually ending up at the point on the canvas where it started. This was simplifying the problem of painting by making its purpose concrete. But at this point the question of simplification merges into the question of purpose.

We like to think that the purpose of a painter, whose innovation we admire, was always clear. We say that Cezanne was a pioneer of "plastic qualities"—

which as a term used to be a catch-all to indicate a disinterest in the imitation of nature and an interest in canvas, plus its shape, plus paint—as ends in themselves. Whatever that means. We, and the cubists, became facile enough to say that plastic qualities in a painting guaranteed a preliminary emotion. Every emotion, likewise, guaranteed a concrete existence. Good old Cezanne! We couldn't get beyond him! But the cubists began to explain themselves variously as seeking to "simplify the objective world"; "make the particular object universal"; "give a truer vision of the world through a more personal one"; and "rule out the personal as needless distortion." They also attempted, in the words of their faithful theorists Gleizes and Metzinger, "to move around an object to seize successive appearances, which, fused in a single image, reconstitute it in time." Clear enough as a purpose, problematical in its effect.

Perhaps it is only safe, in view of their own testimony, to say that the men who started as cubists were breaking down the pictorial conception of the objective world, and that they chose to call their procedure analytical. This doesn't mean that the first abstract picture was an accident. But its intention may have been no more clear than that of those innovations, now extinct, such as orphism and dadaism—the former of which reduced the cubist problem of construction to child's play, substituting an interest in the exploitation of color intensity, the latter of which facetiously and then woe-fully sought to deny the value of painting altogether. Today we like to say that the affirmative statements were more useful. Yet the futurists' noisy manifesto for an excess of motion and Jeanneret's worship of the machine are not negated, as influences, by many of the former becoming fascist converts, and the latter becoming Le Corbusier, the architect. All who contributed to the fervor for experimentation, and who boldly exploited even the possibilities of accident, were valuable men. Among those who failed we should list rather men like Matisse who followed a tradition downwards and, partly because he lived so long, became a pleasant pattern-maker, after the original makers of patterns had died.

Because the artists were men, instinct turned them back after every vigorous sally into the unknown, to a reliance upon forms and colors deriving their significance from an essential, but not obvious, resemblance to the items of the natural world. The transition to abstractionism from what was, relatively, a cubist dogmatism, we may most readily attribute to human instinct. The experiments were guided by the elements implicit in the

character of all artists, explicit in the growth of the individual, and contained finally in every work of art which is satisfying. The reference is to those two impulses which we may regard as the expansive and the restrictive, or the urge toward freedom and the urge to consolidate this freedom through some sort of formal discipline.

Each movement within abstractionism which was distinct enough to have had a special name may be best understood as a check upon all others. This will be true whether we are concerned with the complicated excesses of futurist theory or the uncomplicated excesses of neo-plastic practice. Beginning, accordingly, we may note the especial contributions of the constructivists working mainly in Russia, and of that loosely formed brotherhood of painters in Paris, now to be referred to as abstract surrealists—groups having much the character of opposites.

The idea which so enamored Vladimir Tatlin in 1913 that he founded a movement, was briefly, that each piece of sculpture should be made up of materials so selected, so shaped and so attached to each other that the piece would have no more excess weight or detail, and no more inconsistencies, than a good house or a good tool. The movement was pretty much confined to sculpture, although Tatlin and Lissitsky themselves painted. The question of purpose of a piece of sculpture Tatlin chose not to answer by theory. His unique contribution was the thought that the purpose of any piece of art could not be separated from its structure. The function might determine the way it was built, but, conversely, the function was determined by the structure. In the present exhibit the construction of Gabo, titled "Monument For an Airport," made from glass and metal planes, may be taken as an adequate illustration of the point, assuming that glass and metal are appropriate to the subject of aeronautics, and assuming that the planes, as put together, are most serviceably to be composed of glass and the particular metal used. The "Realistic Manifesto," published by Gabo in 1920, is virtually an application of the dialectics of materialism to the problems of the artist. Abroad, a similar "functional viewpoint" was being offered in Germany by Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian ex-lawyer. Cooperating with Gropius at the *Bauhaus*, he is responsible for introducing into the advanced industrial world of Germany a more sensible and economical tradition for machine construction. The steel implement, whether a drill or a vehicle, was often built, prior to this date, with almost the exact proportions as the making it of wood might have necessitated, and it was decorated

by the scrolls and jiggers traditional to an ornamented manuscript.

The principle of constructivist economy may be taken as typical of the effort of artists engaged in experimentation to discipline their efforts. It is only because art is not a cut-and-dried business, but is incalculable in many of its effects, that the more imaginative work of Miro and the early Kandinsky may be looked upon as indispensable. Miro's method in accumulating his interesting and provocative shapes might be termed less conscious, or, if one likes the word better, intuitive. Such intuitive vigor, unless held in check, makes often for capers on canvas too personal and insufficiently organized by the usual rules of composition, to be effective; just as the work of the constructivists, in practice, limited itself most entirely to a play upon the laws of physics such as tension, balance, resistance and gravity, at the expense of what we term the more human emotions. But between being ineffective because one's work is anarchistic and personal, and being ineffective because one's work is mechanical and cold, there is scarcely any choice. Between such extremes the future course of abstractionism is obliged to chart itself and proceed warily because it is, unable to fall back upon the easy imitation of nature. In the difficulty of balancing—or integrating it might be better to say the intuitive with the rational, the particular with the general, the personal with the impersonal, and the expressive with the structural, lies naturally enough the source of power. When Mr. Barr, director of the Modern Museum, remarks that in ruling out connotations of subject matter, such as the sentimental, documentary, political, sexual and religious, the painter indicates a preference for purity at the expense of impoverishment of his possible range of values, he is either in error or we misunderstand him. The limitations placed upon an artist by himself are not an impoverishment, if the purpose of the artist is, as we have always understood, profound rather than extensive.

The question suggested by the present exhibit as to what ultimately the painters were after is best answered by considering how modern art got going in the first place. A revolt against the insipid taste in the academies, so they say. But were not all the ancient movements precisely this? What distinguished the new revolt, from the cubists onward, was its violence and thoroughness. With the public still choking over the outrageous Cezanne, the artists in Paris solemnly pronounced the good apple painter a beginner. The violence, recklessness, despair, and even the facetiousness of what seems to be a

second and unprecedented stage of the revolt, can only be understood when we consider what the artist's position in society at that date had become.

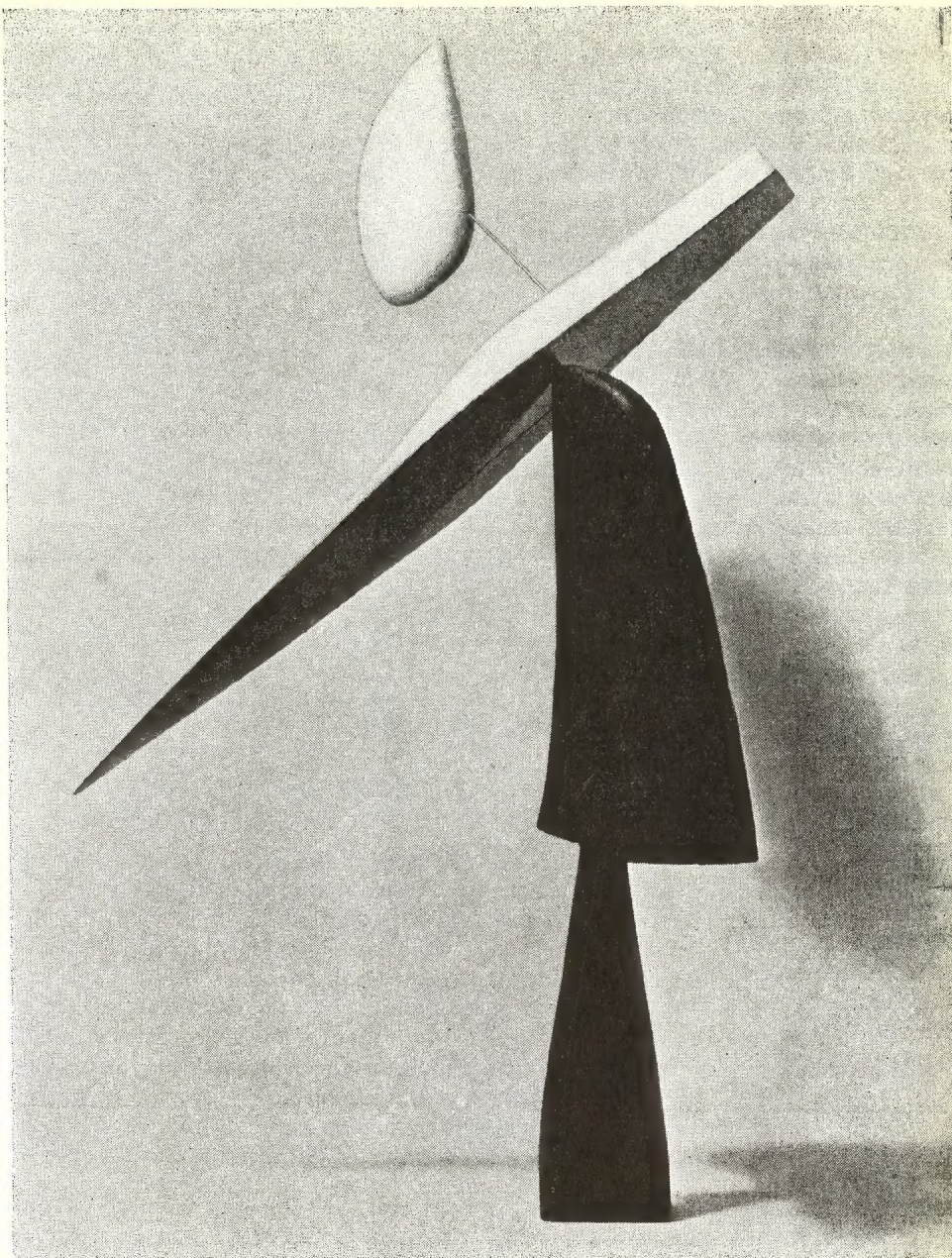
He had become declassed. After the industrial revolution, the balance of power had been shifting to the middle class. In the new sweeping democratization the artist stood revealed because of his personal attitude, because of his painting traditions, and because of the conventional attitude of the public toward him, a figure left over from feudal centuries, a skeleton endured by people because he was amusing or seemed to be suffering an excruciating and mysterious passion.

He could survive only by establishing a serviceable relationship to the class accumulating the balance of power. But the new middle class was impossible as patrons. First, because, lacking any taste of their own, they aped in an embarrassed way the taste of a defunct aristocracy. Secondly, they were not rich enough to assume the flourishes or build the collections traditional to the patron. Finally, the dominant man produced now by society was a specialist, a trained man committed to useful work, essentially a Puritan with an enquiring mind, tolerant of calendar pictures in deference to the misses who were affected by them because they were supposed to be useless; but most of all, and proudly, he was anti-beauty. He could not tolerate the man declassed by centuries of private patronage.

The newly rich, a bastard aristocracy not thriving until our times, simplified the difficulty of being patrons and vulgarized it by giving birth to the *thoroughly* illegitimate middlemen of art—hired tasters, enthusiasts at a percentage, and society-art promoters, attached, respectively and *par example*, to the *Herald Tribune*, the John Levy Gallery and Mrs. X's boudoir.

They were not pulling a stunt, those few artists with guts who, in 1905, precipitated a second and violent period of the revolution which is art. From their garrets in Paris began to descend those amazing manifestos of purpose and sometimes lack of purpose, which showed clearer than anything else that the authors were men unclassed, drawing much of their enthusiasm from saying, "To hell with the public!" They refused to be prostitutes, they were regarded as clowns. And, as clowns, not often willing ones, not being paid well, they were often introverts. They were uniquely free, their daring out of bounds, even out of bounds of a clearly established purpose.

Therefore, this question is framed for us: Just how did the abstract artist, in formulating his new art by which to build experiences for people, help *himself* toward a more vital and tangible relation-



Object

Alexander Calder

Courtesy, Pierre Matisse Gallery

ship with society? Part of the answer must be in his becoming a specialist. But the full answer is contained in his recognition that the specialist's dictum is right; that the specialist must not be servile to tradition; and that the economy dictated by industrial society could not be violated. In short, he became a materialist. Being a man without position in society, he first dissected the vitals of his art to find its significance and potential significance for himself, then ended with a willingness to build a new art starting as humbly as the mechanic who assembles his pulleys, steel plates and rods preparatory to building a machine. He denied the difference commonly held to exist between what is useful and what is artistic. The partial evidence of this is seen in such men as Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy developing a new commercial servability for photo-

graphy; Doesburg, Le Corbusier, Lissitzky and Rietveld bringing a new practicality to architecture; Leger, Lurcat and Picasso designing such common objects of use as rugs and furniture with their pleasantness inseparable from the utility; and, finally, Rodchenko, Cassandre, Grosz, and Gropper, bringing to commercial advertising and to political advertising or agitation a new effectiveness. The effort was in no case to add prettiness to the practical arts, but first to define their utility in terms even of the potential and then to devise corrections which would make decoration and other irrelevancies impossible. *It is not by any accident that the men who removed beauty as a servile afterthought from the applied arts, also removed utility as a servile vassal to ignorance and tradition from the fine arts.*

In establishing the new art of form and color, the artist has merely reasserted that *his function is profound rather than extensive*. Without denying that his ultimate aim is to touch the crowd, he sees the futility of addressing it in the language commonly used by the crowd. He must employ his own language, in this instance the language of form and color, in order to move, dominate and direct the crowd, which is his especial way of being understood. There is nothing exceptional and nothing alarming in the fact that the artist is to be comprehended fully, and may even be excessively admired, by a future generation or a new society. The point in abstractionism, actually, is that the function of art and the means of achieving this function have been for the first time made

inseparable. This step was required, of course, not by the artist's tradition but by the new materialism, the only deduction possible from the industrial viewpoint. The new art, as a product of society's evolution, retains the artist, even as the Marxist dialectician will have it, as "a propagandist whether he wishes to be one or not." As an artist, he is obliged to have a message, but he cannot express at one and the same time the artist's message and that of the specific agitator.

A hurried, skeptical journey through the Modern Museum's show will not demontstrate, but a laborious and honest viewing of the exhibited work will, that the artist retains a function, not *above* the practical in the sense of being more important, but one which is *distinct* from

the *so-called* practical. In a sense, the artist integrates. He integrates, for people, largely in their leisure time, appealing to man we may say at his furthest point of progression from lower forms of animal life. The politician may be the apologist for man's destructive tendencies, many of which may be abetted by such practical and positive knowledge as that provided by science. We are anxious in these days to so malign him. The political revolutionist, to the extent that he has a broader vision, would control such practical knowledge as man has for the social good. The artist achieves no distinction from these, if he cannot influence mankind more directly, approaching him, immediately as we say, with a more personal experience.

GOVERNMENT IN ART

PAPER READ BY ARNOLD FRIEDMAN AT THE AMERICAN ARTISTS' CONGRESS

NO more than four years ago a noted art commentator wrote to Washington for a listing of American products. He wanted some factual material on art production as related to production in general. In due time he received the listing from Washington. Everything was there from A to Z, from alfalfa to zinc—with one exception. Art was not mentioned.

Since that time art has attained a position in our national life which cannot be ignored. It has received the official blessing of the Federal administration, which in itself is the most progressive step in art ever taken by any American administration. Inadequate as the Government program is, it is a step in the right direction. Whatever criticisms are made here are for the purpose of correcting administrative errors before they harden into set molds. Our desire is that artists have a genuine chance to express themselves and to make a living while doing so. Whatever forces conflict with these aims must be combatted.

In general, the Government program was inaugurated in November 1933, with the establishment of the P.W.A.P. This marked the first effort of any American administration to cooperate with its artists on a fairly large scale. The Government spent \$1,185,000 over a period of about six months, employing 3,749 artists. Wages ranged from \$27.00 to \$38.25 for a 30-hour week. Artists were employed for periods ranging from one or two months to six months.

After five months or so, the P.W.A.P. was permitted to lapse and the artists were out of work again. At this time pressure began to be exerted by several art organizations, notably the Artists' Union, for project jobs. This movement gained momentum as artists' organizations began to remind the Government of its obligations to the cultural workers of the country. What resulted was that the State Administrations began rehiring a handful of former P.W.A.P. artists at the reduced rate of \$24.00 for a 30-hour week.

This wage level set the standard for the W.P.A. which was inaugurated later. However, the 30-hour week was reduced to 24 hours as a result of the insistence of artists for a union standard for their work.

This history is necessary as a sketchy background for the federally sponsored projects and competitions, because it was at about this time that the first announcements of the Treasury Department were made. The Procurement Division of the Treasury Department created the Section of Painting and Sculpture and issued publicity on the national competitions.

If we remember that this sudden interest in art on the part of the Government took place in the blackest depths of the crisis; if we remember that public buildings and local centers throughout the country were to be decorated with contemporary art; if we realize the importance of art as an instrument of national unity, we will not be surprised by the sudden emphasis on art on the part of the

Federal Administration. There is no contradiction in gladly aiding the Government's program, if artists are given full right to express themselves, plastically and socially. The trouble is that certain purposes are broadly hinted at in the bulletins. Side by side with invitations for artists to make suggestions regarding the subject matter for murals and sculpture are official discouragements of social criticism, abstract painting, and the like. For instance, in the very first bulletins Admiral Peoples makes the following cogent remarks:

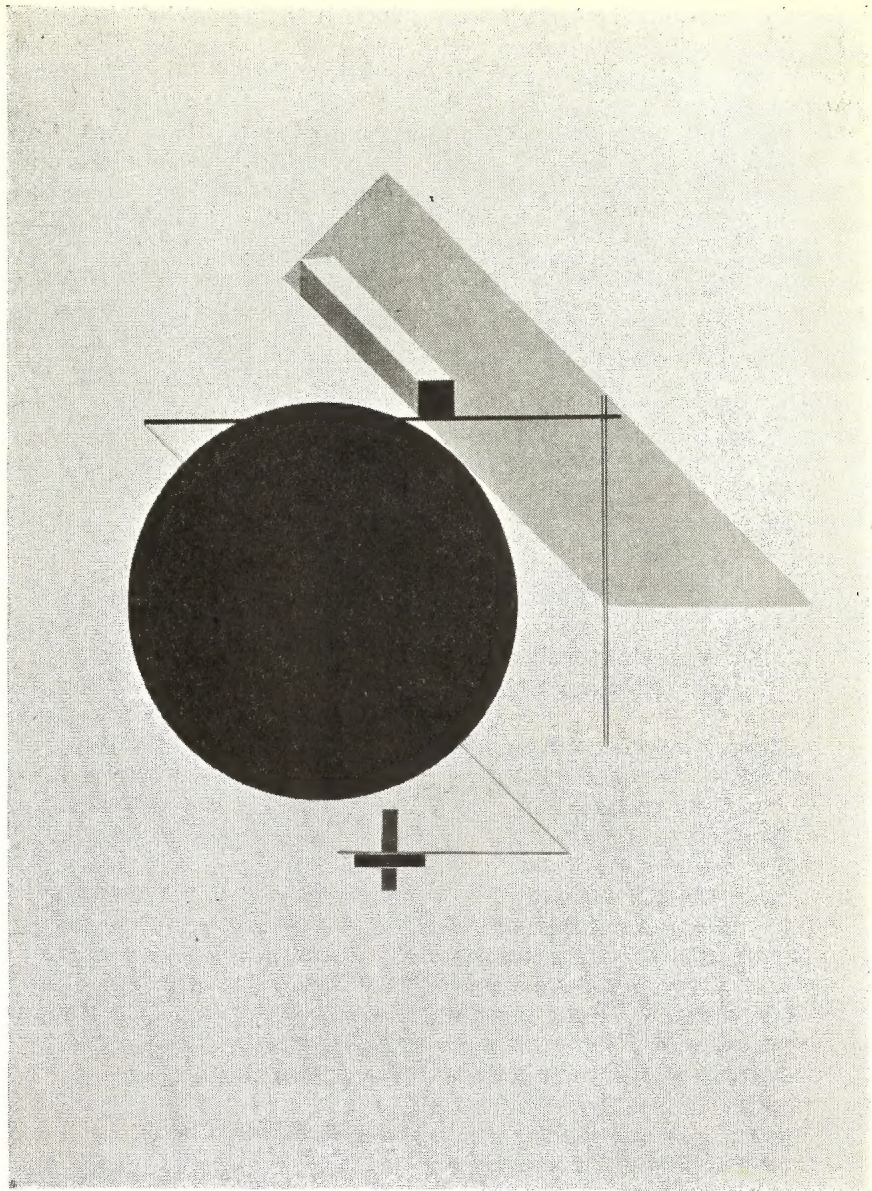
"It has been said that among the reasons why Florentine paintings reached such heights, one was that the firm critical standard of those who ordered work was such that no artist dared to do a mediocre painting or piece of sculpture. Another was that the inhabitants, including the artists, were so imbued with the glory of Florence, that they would do nothing which did not enhance that glory. Without being sentimental, the Section of Painting and Sculpture hopes that in employing the vital talents of this country, faith in the country and a renewed sense of its glorious possibilities will be awakened both in the artists and their audiences."

This is a rather sharp reminder that socially critical art would not be tolerated by the Procurement Department. Surely, a group of unemployed men in a mural does not "enhance the glory" of a country. Neither does an abstract design. Statements like these give plenty of leeway to lay juries throughout the country

for rejection of murals they may dislike. Juries of school principals, school boards of superintendents, directors of libraries, prisons, hospitals and settlement houses, together with the "prominent local citizens" provided for in the Government plans, ran hog-wild in their rejection of sketches throughout the nation. Hundreds of artists have been victims of such juries. Some of the more prominently publicized have been Kelley in Philadelphia, William Rowe in Buffalo, Wilson in Terre Haute, Leo Katz in California, Edward Laning, Michael Loew, Louis Ferstadt, Ben Shahn and Lou Block in New York. The fact that juries were composed for the most part of non-artists, but rather of administrators and directors did not help in the selection of good art. It is obvious that these local juries are not qualified to pass judgment on art works. Furthermore, they are not responsible to the artists for their selections. The conspicuous mistakes they have made should indicate to the Government that a new set-up is necessary in these local juries. The main body of jury members should be composed of artists, who should have more weight in determining the suitability of art works than lay juries. Furthermore, they should be responsible to the artists for their selections.

To a lesser degree the same methods were used in determining the Treasury Department jury. The Advisory Committee which arbitrarily selected the eleven best painters and the two best sculptors to receive contracts without competition had only two painters and one sculptor on its list. The rest of the Committee was composed of museum directors and administrators. Perhaps the Treasury Department was under the illusion that the seven museum directors were just as qualified as the four artists. Let the Treasury Department disabuse itself of such notions. Museum directors today have very little to do with contemporary art; at best they are dealers in antiques. As such, they are out of touch with the problems of contemporary artists.

There is no quarrel with the artists on the Advisory Committee. The fact that Peixotto, Schnakenberg, Speicher and Miss Huntington represent a certain phase of contemporary art is not wrong in itself; what is wrong is that the artists on the Advisory Committee were not recommended by artists' organizations. If they had been, the artists would have seen to it that all varieties of esthetic tendencies would have been represented. Not only that, but the artists on the Committee would have been directly responsible to the organizations which recommended them. As it was, much bitterness resulted



Construction, 1923

El Lissitzky

Courtesy, The Museum of Modern Art

from the ill-advised manner in which the Advisory Committee functioned. This friction could easily have been avoided.

Hundreds of artists worked on sketches for the Post Office competition. Time, labor and talent were expended on the chance that the sketches would be accepted. Despite the fact that each artist was invited to compete, no one was paid for his sketches. This reduced the competitions to the level of speculation and made the invitations an ironic gesture.

Why shouldn't artists who are invited to submit sketches receive remuneration for their time and energy? Architects receive pay for designs submitted for Federal buildings. Every type of labor is paid for work contracted for. Artists are still gentle souls who shrink from traffic with such crass goods as money.

Each winner in the Post Office competition was to get \$3,000 for murals on two panels. This pay was to include the expense of installation, cost of materials,

models, scaffolding, and in most cases rental of studios in Washington. One third of the amount was to be paid on acceptance and approval of the sketches. The rest was to be paid later. In the long run, the pay for the winners in the Washington competition, for sculptors as well as painters, can be safely conjectured to be less per hour than the pay for artists on the relief projects. In the smaller local centers, where the payment is considerably less, the competition winners also do not possess prize plums.

Possibly the worst example of mismanagement and irresponsibility in the national competitions is the case of the Department of Justice murals. Ninety sketches by fifty-five nationally known artists were rejected and the competition closed. None of the artists was paid for his sketches. When competing artists wrote to Washington for information, they were informed that none of the sketches had been "adequate in composi-

tion" for the purpose. The bulletins announcing the competition had not indicated what type of "composition" was adequate, but merely suggested in a single line that "the subject matter of these murals should deal with some phase of the administration of justice in relation to contemporary American life." The competing artists cannot be responsible for not knowing what the Administration wanted.

Bulletin No. 7 carries a protest from the Society of Mural Painters, criticizing the handling of the Department of Justice Building. In his protest, William C. Palmer, secretary of the Mural Painters remarks:

"Such disastrous results as this failure make the hazards of entering a competition very great in these difficult times."

Olin Dow, answers for the Treasury Department in the following manner:

"It is true that the subject matter given out for the Justice competition was vague as compared to that for the Post Office. It was the considered intention to leave the interpretation of this up to each artist."

"I believe that similar subject matter has stimulated Daumier, Delacroix and Forain to find conceptions to fill murally, and otherwise, a certain space. According to the advice of a very fair-minded, broad-gauged, painstaking and careful jury (two of whom are members of the Mural Painters Society) none of these conceptions was considered adequate, in composition, to decorate the Justice Building spaces."

In other words, the artist was free to interpret Justice in his own way. The only trouble was that the Department of Justice didn't want any of the interpretations. Calling up the ghosts of Daumier, Forain and Delacroix does not answer the Mural Painters' charge that the Justice competitors gave no indication of the type of composition they wanted.

The newspapers, in their usual cynical fashion made pertinent commentary on the mural sketches. "Not enough sweetness and light" was the heading of a story in a Washington paper. This explanation is far more satisfying than Olin Dows'.

When one of the directors of the Art Students' League wrote to Washington asking whether he could exhibit the rejected mural sketches, he was advised against such an exhibition. Except for a showing of several sketches at the Corcoran Gallery exhibition neither artists nor public were permitted to judge the adequacy of the sketches for themselves. In so serious and general a rejection, it is only fair that the decision receive general approval.

In this connection, congratulations are in order to the Treasury Department in

approving the sketches of George Biddle over the veto of the Fine Arts Commission. Though Mr. Biddle was not one of the competing artists, it is a sad commentary on the Fine Arts Commission when the Federal Administration shows more understanding of contemporary art than the Commission. The acceptance of Biddle's sketch of the tenements and sweatshops of yesterday and an allied panel marks a significant victory of the forces of cultural progress over the forces dedicated to the preservation of the decadent standards of the last century, so strongly entrenched in the Fine Arts Commissions of Washington and New York.

On the projects the artists have given a splendid account of themselves. The recent exhibition of project work in New York called forth extravagant praise. Several of the newspaper critics characterized the exhibition as the finest in the city. When artists are giving such fine returns for their salaries, it is all the more important that charges of wastefulness be hurled back. It is significant that reactionary forces are attacking the art projects. William Randolph Hearst's *New York Sunday Mirror* ran a series of articles characterizing the artists on the projects as "Hobohemian Chiselers." This attack on culture by fascist forces is merely a foretaste of what Fascism would do, if it were in the saddle. It is

PAINTING IN FASCIST ITALY

In the first half of this article, in the March issue of the ART FRONT, it was shown that Italian futurist painting expresses fascist jingoism, while the Avant-gardist painting expresses the ideal of a static social hierarchy. The following examination of "fine art" completes this analysis of contemporary painting in Italy.

"FINE art" is supposedly free of all political expression. This is because instead of being an avowed instrument for imperialist propaganda, it is an object of imperialist expansion. It is a luxury product, competing against other luxury products such as perfumes, Chinese pottery or jewelry, as well as antique art and other contemporary painting.

In 1927, an illuminating article by Bragaglia appeared in *La Critica Fascista*. He called art an "idle mine" more valuable than agriculture. He suggested a program for the development of this industry, and the methods to employ in

the type of slander that must be combatted by the Artists' Congress.

In the case of the disposition of art works by the W.P.A. a few precautionary suggestions should be made. According to the stipulations of the W.P.A., paintings are to be given to tax-paying public institutions in return for \$3.50 for the cost of materials. Prints rate from 35 cents to 75 cents each. It is important that no art works be given to museums, which have purchase funds set aside for art. If museums can get works by contemporary artists for nothing, it will seriously cut into the income of living artists. Museums should pay current market prices for contemporary art because, if they do not, prices for pictures will fall considerably.

Hospitals, settlement houses, schools, and public institutions in general can pay scaled-down prices, since they purchase no art anyway.

If the cultural level of the American people is to be raised, if art is to flourish and become noteworthy, it is imperative that permanent art projects be established, that freedom of expression be granted in deed as well as word, and that artists' organizations be given more responsibility in handling their own problems. It is this wish to be of service in the great work of developing art in America that has prompted the remarks in this paper.

by Margaret Duroc

order to increase the foreign market. Foreign markets, he said, are critical of art which they know is regulated by the State. With regard to the promotion of art, he advises the collection of works of merit, interesting the artists in sales through direct acquisitions and subsidies, the advancement of loans to artists, and any other aid which would increase the amount of artistic production. For the development of the markets, he advises that periodic and special exhibits be held within the country and abroad, which should be very well advertised in the journals; that periodicals, monographs, conferences, and all possible types of propaganda should be employed; and that the attention and interest of notable people and the acquiring classes should be attracted; and finally, "labor not to follow the artistic vanities of the various countries, but also to create in these the mode, which always leads the works of art of a school to success."

All of this the Italian government has

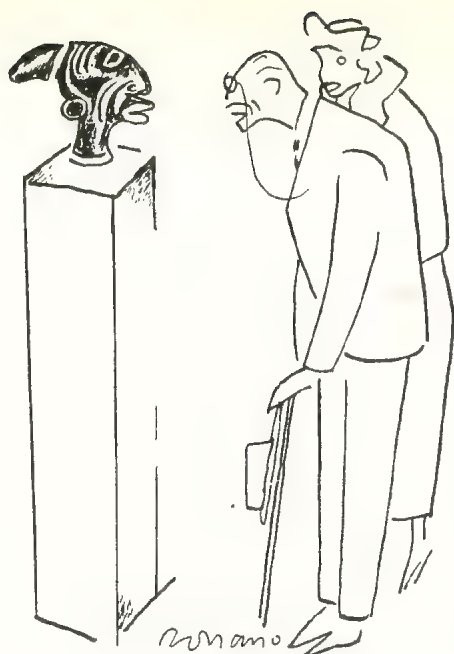
done its utmost to fulfill. The most important propaganda work which it had to perform among the artists was to break the influence of the French schools of art. Impressionism, expressionism, all the so-called radical expressions were decried as Bolshevism, and a return to classicism was called for. Italy was establishing an independent national school, a new mode!

Even more openly than those of any other country, the Italian art exhibits are art fairs. Hierarchical organization has been sought even in these expositions. Saporì marvels at their limp ordering: an annual interregional, a biennial international, a triennial decorative, and a quadrennial national. It might possibly seem a more limp ordering to have fewer international shows, and more national ones. It would be very stupid, however, because the international shows bring in more money.

This intensive commercialization of Italian painting accounts for the fact that it is relatively better developed than the other arts in fascist Italy. Literature, music, the theatre, the cinema, sculpture, are all notoriously poor. This is the inevitable consequence of the general decline in living standards, except among the very minority of the very wealthy. In the midst of this general cultural desert, there are strenuous efforts to force the development of painting and of archaeology, for their commercial value and for such glamour as they can shed on the fascist regime. However, we shall see that the painting which is produced under these conditions does not escape the deadly effects of the fascist decay.

Fine Art is addressed to two audiences: those wealthy enough to be able to buy it, and the museum public. Bragaglia looked upon the museum collections only as a sales promotion scheme. They are of course also a means of advertising fascism's presumably high cultural level. However, since the museum-goer is expected to admire what pleases the wealthy, the artist only needs to address himself to the latter.

In the art which the Italian artist produces for this audience we find a visible expression of the position of the wealthy classes in society today. The wealthy classes are no longer interested in an active progressive society, because it increases their present insecurity. They are interested in maintaining the status quo. Controlled production instead of expanding production is the order of the day. In the art produced for these people we find no expression of activity. Everything is calm and serene. (De Pisis and Di Chirico, two outstanding Italian artists whose work does not fit this description, both live in Paris.) The subject



Soriano

matter is always neutral, dealing with so-called universal themes, such as the harmonies of nature. All social and agitational subject-matter is excluded. All radicalism in style, which includes impressions, is also excluded. The reason for this is that these styles communicate a restlessness and activity which is unpleasant to the propertied classes.

The artist does not necessarily paint this way under duress. He is a member of his society, and is influenced by the prevailing ideologies. Ferazzi conveniently presents us with an artist's understanding of his position in society. In a series of cartoons ordered by the government, in order to establish the industry of tapestry weaving, he depicted the nine corporations, one of which is that of the Artists, Writers, and Professionals. Three men, barefooted and dressed in a light costume resembling pajamas, lie under a tree. In the background a winged genius is seen transmitting inspiration from the heavens to the earth. This complete abstraction of the artist from life is also expressed by Gentile, official philosopher of fascism. According to him, "Art is a refuge and an escape from the hard laws of real life for everyone," and "Art is a consolation." And in truth, an examination of the 750 paintings at the Venice Biennial (1934), indicates that this is the opinion of the artists themselves. The art is essentially lyrical in character, it is serene and beautiful. Entrance into the Italian pavilion was a retreat from reality. But in this very retreat fascism is expressed. One is reminded of an essentially fascist play, "Death Takes a Holiday." Everything is blooming, there is no decay or change of any kind indicated.

Sarfatti, volunteer promoter of Italian

art, has said that the light in the paintings of the neo-classical Italian school (known as Novocento) is "the same equal light that is reflected at the zenith of the Roman sky, and to which time seems chained and charmed, transformed into a more noble substance, the substance of eternity." (Article *Novocento* in *Almanaco Degli Artisti*, 1930.) Eternity and permanence are expressed in these paintings. They are the same qualities which we saw in the Museum of the Revolution. There it was the State which was made to appear permanent, while here it is the gifts of the State.

By tabulation over half of the Venice show represented still lifes and landscapes. Landscapes such as one might see when strolling over the countryside during the summer holidays, or which one might hunt up during leisurely travels. The still lifes—fruits, flowers, or seafoods—might all have been picked or collected during such rambles. The other paintings do not disturb this pleasant vacation world: beautiful women, soulful children, a little tennis, a little theatre, and a few artists and writers. The paintings which depicted subjects which were not in themselves esthetic were very rare. There were no social themes, and no satire, no humor, no caricature, no passion and no enthusiasm. These are too dangerous for the Italian garden.

The predominant style is neoclassical. Distortions are not disdained but they have an archaistic appearance. This is not accidental. The archaic artist, through the limitations of his technique or the low development of the history of observation, used forms which were simplified and static. This resulted in an appearance of great stability. The Italian artist, seeking to express stability, has used this archaism. The classical style itself is chosen, not because it is inherently Italian, as the promoters of the school maintain, although such a tradition undoubtedly was an important factor, but primarily because it is suitable to the expression of stability.

There is pleasantness but little joy in the figures of this Italian garden. The most interesting of the Italian artists, such as Cassorati or Carra, are decidedly tragic in character. In an interesting painting entitled *Daphne*, Cassorati represents a young woman suffering from an uncommunicative sorrow, which she is nobly bearing. Her head is thrown far back so that the face, which is the carrier of expression, is removed from direct contact with the observer. This gesture, since it results in a slight choking, which prevents speech, is associated with self-contained sorrow in everyday life. The composition is architecturally ordered.

There is a wide base to the figure and the horizontal and vertical framework is emphasized. This sorrow is not a passing experience, nor is it even one that will change its actor, but it has the appearance of being posed for eternity. It is a very nice looking sorrow, but practically it is a little stupid. It expresses the inevitability of death, and the uselessness of struggling against it, so that there is actually an acceptance of it in advance. One cannot imagine a more static conception. This mute sorrow is a general characteristic of the figure painting.

Sironi, who did not exhibit at the Venice show, has achieved a considerable reputation recently, partially through his work at the Museum of the Revolution. Unlike the majority of the artists, he does paint working men. His figures, though massively conceived, are actually copies of clay dolls, hastily formed to resemble the human being, but lacking all human articulation. They assert no individuality within their settings, but have blurred outlines, and their limbs even disappear in the environment.

In his *Lavore*, a large mural in which nineteen figures represent different aspects of human activity, chiefly with

classical allusions, one finds that there is a lack of dynamic relationship between them and their settings, with the possible exception of the contemplating youth who is leaning against a parapet in a classical pose. A single analysis illustrates this. A tree is being chopped down. This tree is painted as a hollow upright. It ends abruptly at the base, and no suggestion is given as to how it is knit into the ground. It has but two short wide hollow branches, which could never have borne any shoots, and which could not have been fed by the juice of the tree. This tree seems about to topple over through its own weakness, and not because of the woodsman's act. The woodsman is seen from the back, with his hatchet raised over his head. The pose suggests strength, and yet one cannot imagine that it ever will be completed. The leg onto which the weight must be shifted in order to continue the act has been lost in the environment, and consequently the suggestion of continued action has been removed from the painting, to leave there only a static pose of strength.

Since all aspects of labor are presumably represented here, it is significant that the industrial laborer is missing.

Machine labor, which when employed for the benefit of all mankind, would permit all to enjoy what is now limited to a fraction of the population—the machine, the instrument of a changing world, is missing. The expression of the figures, when it is not merely neutral, is, as with Carra and Cassorati, nobly tragic. In his formal treatment of the figures, and in his iconography, Sironi creates a static world, a world of ghosts, heir to the memories of the past, but not builders of the future.

The tragic tone of Italian painting is inherent in the fascist economic system. Marinetti, the protofascist, had asked for an art which affirmed life. But the present main line in his own school of futurist painting is towards greater mysticism and abstraction from life. And the painting of the acknowledged artists of the Fine Arts group is likewise towards a complete abnegation of life, even when expressing such positive aspects of human activity as physical labor. The denial of the "myth of happiness and indefinite progress," which Mussolini formulated as part of the doctrine of fascism, is very apparent in Italian painting, and is but the expression of a non-progressive economic organization.

THE PROJECT GRAPHIC SHOW

THERE has been much loose talk by people high in official and semi-official circles on the comparative rareness of genius, with oblique reference to artists on the W.P.A. It seems that most mortals are not foreordained to be artists and should be correspondingly discouraged from practising, with the gentlemen of the first part in the role of arbiters. A few super-mundane practitioners, directly endowed by the Almighty, should receive a little support in return for their art; the rest of the rabble who presume to think themselves artists should be systematically cleared away from the art field. This is not exaggeration. There still remain in this day and age certain romantic gentry who turn to the masters with glazed eyes and dare to use them as foils against native artists who are struggling to develop contemporary art forms.

This gross underestimation of the potentialities of American artists received a severe jolt in the Federal Art Project Exhibition of prints, monotypes, watercolors and pastels just concluded at the Project Gallery, 7 East 38th Street. It takes an exhibition of this sort to make one conscious of the shocking waste of really good native talent; it lets us know

that thousands of vital and potentially vital American artists are doomed to struggle on in poverty and obscurity unless the government can be made to sponsor art projects on a really large scale; it shows up the "big name" fallacy so industriously pursued by the commercial galleries for reasons which are obvious.

The exhibition shows a heightened social consciousness on the part of the artists. They are becoming more concerned with the people; the people's problems are becoming theirs also.

I don't remember a single nude (at the exhibition, of course). Practically no still-lives and very few landscapes of the innocuous variety are here. The bulk of the exhibition is composed of papers which grip reality with an uncompromising firmness.

In this respect the graphic show is more interesting than the preceding exhibition of easel pictures. Perhaps the easel painters were made more conscious of the fact that their pictures were going to public institutions like hospitals and schools, and subjected to official frowns over subjects of a "depressing" nature. Another factor is the tradition of graphic art, which is more directly a mass art than easel painting and which has as its chief

exponents the great satirists and socially minded masters.

Nan Lurie's lithographs, "Women's House of Detention" and "Harlem" are standouts, not only because of effective emotionalizing of the forms and general technical excellence, but also because of the power of condensation which makes the prints social documents. Both lithographs are part of a series dealing with the degradation of women in modern society, and when a woman stands up for her social rights, well . . .

Don Freeman, familiar as the romantic commentator on back stage life, has turned to the home relief bureau for his subject. The result is the finest lithograph from his hand that I have yet seen. Harry Sternberg, Arnold Blanch, Elizabeth Olds, Joseph Vogel, Hugh Miller, Adolph Dehn, Eli Jacobi, Harold Faye, Yasuo Kuniyoshi and others had fine things on the walls.

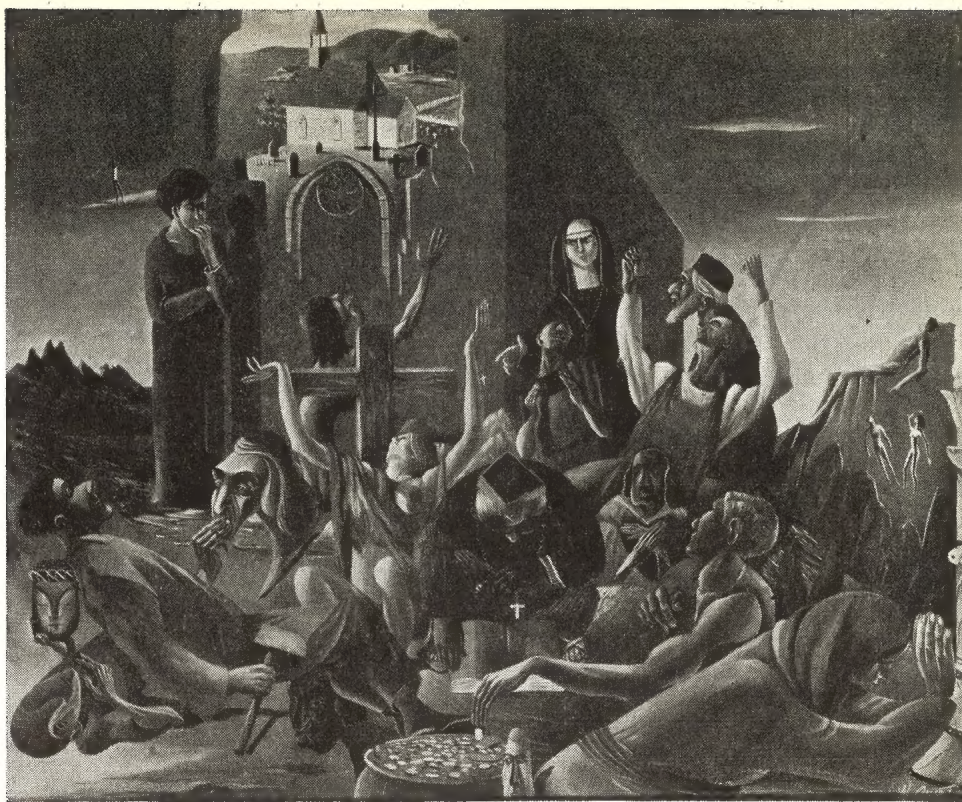
The water colors were disappointing. Miron Sokole's gouache is solid and earthy as usual, and Otto Botto's tempera piece possesses its usual charm, with added depth. Other performances are not exciting.

Out of such exhibitions will native culture develop.

J. K.

"Opium of the People," by Quirt

Courtesy, Julian
Levy Gallery



QUIRT

EASEL painting worries the revolutionary artist. Given the present gallery system, it has fewer communicative chances, if only from a material point of view, than any other form of art, mural, graphic, or even sculpture. Appealing generally to more limited and "experienced" audiences, the painter must exert his imagination in a way calculated to satisfy them. That way is somewhat different from the method employed by his fellow artists. He may use devices developed in the course of modern scientific discovery, or he may try a technique which resembles literary experiments of the day.

The bourgeois critics will of course comment on his sophistication. Is this art for the working class? They will be pleased to announce that Quirt's technique has more in common with surrealism than with revolution. They are wrong as usual. It never occurs to the bourgeois that a revolutionary does not confine himself to the lowest common denominator of cultural development, that he is interested in everything that goes on in the world today, in physics, anthropology and psychology as well as in the class struggle. He is a merciless marauder, taking anything of value that he can lay his hands on. And so if he has an audience that re-

quires the riches of science and poetry, he will be able to supply them.

Quirt has begun to do this. In his recent show at the Julien Levy gallery he has broken away from his former rather uninteresting stylization of strike conflicts, war scenes and the like. Half way between realism and an old fashioned symbolism, those works might move one only in the degree that they were reminiscent of actual struggles, as the name, Lenin, spoken oratorically, might arouse feeling. They created nothing new, but only stiffened and denatured the events they dealt with.

In his present painting Quirt abandons this cautious and obvious technique. He starts from the symbol of the Waste Land which has touched all of modern poetry and at least half of contemporary painting. This devastated landscape is peopled with victims and modern monsters. Masked figures, vast skulls on foetuses, headless gentlemen with top hats, floating through the air, a body with hundreds of wounds and sores firing a cannon, squash-like heads and classical statues that send Negroes to the electric chair, these move like instruments of torture over a starved and tormented population. In one picture use is made of the old proverb idea which intrigued Breugel.

Sayings of the people are given new or reversed interpretations having political or social point. Quirt takes the hackneyed American virtues to how they are caricatured in practice, the starved saving money, the half dead worker kissing the boss's feet, virtue reduced to a chemise.

However, the landscape of Quirt differs greatly from that of the modern bourgeois poets. Torment is not merely "in the air," a spiritual bane which dries up the rivers. No one expects release by the mysterious touch of a fisher king. Here the enemies are known, the bankers, the generals, the officials of firms. The parched earth gives way to ploughed under crops. Tiresias is evicted from his farm. Five flying Jehovahs won't give the people bread. And the fisher king, the prince, has been replaced by an angry farmer and an armed worker.

Quirt owes really little beyond suggestions to the surrealists. As a craftsman, he has looked at the Florentines and Siennese, some at Mantegna. (The composition gets too crowded at times, giving or reinforcing an impression of banality of idea). If he dreams it is not after an induced reduction of the intelligence, but over manifestos and resolutions. He is interested in *socialist* poetry. C. W.

TOUR THROUGH THE WHITNEY

by Joe Solman

WHEN the unsuspecting visitor enters the Whitney Museum he beholds on his left a striking water color called "Related to Downtown New York" by the justly celebrated John Marin, full of the artist's unique staccato symbols as imaginative and gripping as Egyptian hieroglyphic art. This sort of picture music is continued in a more hesitant fashion in Dirk's "Late Afternoon," sounds off key when Fiene tries to be Marin in "Pike's Peak," and reaches a perfect standstill in Perkins Hanly's "Decoration Day." From then on the visitor has few stumbling blocks. He can bathe in the lovely emerald pools that trickle through the work of Bell, Day, Keller, Whorf, Smith, and a host of other sea charmers. He can hike over the grand hills of our country with Isabel Whitney, Macklem, and Burwash, inhale the perfumes of flowers redolent of alizarin crimson as cultivated by Klitgaard, Schnakenberg, etc., or idly gaze on the "Wonder of Work," in the industrial vistas of Burchfield, Marsh, Ross and Picken. Of course, when we reach Alice R. Huger Smith's swan gliding through a sun-drenched swamp, we positively gasp. Not that we didn't have a distinct suspicion all along that the Whitney show was just a more flashily dressed Academy, with a few old rebels and still fewer new ones thrown in. But we thought the Museum would have much less trouble filling its wall space.

Though a mood of relaxation not unmixed with boredom pervades the show, we only counted six flower pieces. This is unusual. Many of the artists seemed to be craning their necks to look out of the window, if only to gaze at a cow pasture or horse's rump. Some of them even strolled down to the city's river-bank and Harriton, at least, came back with an honest report. The romantics, like Liberte and Aronson, almost looked audacious. Lonergan came through with a couple of solidly designed gouaches. Higgins wept his usual tears for the mountain folks. Hopper included four gables on his country house making the total number of shadows four. William Zorach and Henry G. Keller ran a close tie for virtuosity, without either of them getting anywhere in particular. Herman Trunk, Jr. won the Betsy Ross Medal for embroidering "Washington" a picture of our glorious capitol against an American Flag. On the credit side Karl Knaths included a fine landscape done in sensitive

shorthand. Hartley in "Sea Ghosts" and Weber in his poetic "Rocky Shore" showed that the old "boys" still had power, if these were recent examples of their work. Matulka was witty and intelligent in "Composition," an array of abstract spectres. George Franklin showed how to mix a bad cocktail out of the Academy and Miro.

A mild, innocuous, middle-class sort of contentment settled over the place. The socially vigorous picture, banished from the scene, would have been incompatible with the frail manners adopted by the Whitney. More abstract examples of art might have been hostile to the museum's red plush and silver-starred decorations. Both forces might have suggested the American "melting-pot" flavor which the trustees have more or less succeeded in avoiding. We can only conclude that, for continued allegiance to stale Americana and to old museum favorites, it was a typical Whitney show..

IN THE AMERICAN TRADITION

TO THE EDITOR:

The rental policy for works of art proposed by the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers and endorsed by the American Artists' Congress seemed to many people a radical innovation. But the idea is more than a century old. In his "History of the Arts of Design in the United States," the first study of its kind in this country, William Dunlap refers to it in a context which is itself very much up to the minute.

Back in 1828, the artists of Philadelphia got together to air their grievances against the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Twenty-seven of them signed their names to a note sent to the board of directors, complaining specifically that they had no voice in the hanging of their pictures for exhibition purposes, in otherwise managing the shows, and generally, "that although their works must eventually support the Academy, they are treated as ciphers."

In their reply, the board reminded the artists how much their patrons had done for them, despite which, "a few artists, of a restless and ambitious temper, and impatient for personal authority and distinction, propagated opinions that artists only should have the government of an Academy of Arts." Even though the protestants hadn't raised the question, the board also declared that no artist, "in any country ever received or expected any other return for the exhibition of his pictures than the introduction of them to the knowledge of the public, and the fame

and emolument he would derive from that knowledge."

In refutation of this last statement Dunlap wrote that John Trumbull, who was vice-president of the American Academy of the Arts, received \$200 for the use of his pictures at a single exhibition of the Academy, and further that "the artists of England have and do receive pecuniary emolument and relief from the funds accumulated by the exhibition of their works".

It is worthy of note, too, that even in those days Dunlap wrote that, while it was all very fine to bring over old masters to this country, he was more interested in providing for living artists.

The significance of the collective action of those Philadelphia artists is to be gauged by the fact that the first effort to establish a school of fine arts had been made only in 1791 and failed to get started. When Charles Wilson Peale made another try at it, he "collected a few plaster casts and even opened a school for the study of the living figure, but could find no model for the students but himself"; but he did succeed in staging at least one exhibition in Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence had been signed.

WILLIAM SCHACK

EXHIBITIONS

A. C. A.—52 W. 8th St. Paintings by Emptage. March 21-April 6. Sculpture by Hauser. April 8-20. American Place—Stieglitz—509 Madison Ave. New oils by Marsden Hartley. March 22-April 12. Arthur Dove. Water colors and oils. April 15-May 15. Another Place—43 W. 8th St. De Hirsh Margules. Through April. This is a courageous little gallery showing good American moderns. Artists' Union—430 6th Ave. Project 1262 exhibition. March 22-April 15. Bignou—32 E. 57th St. Tapestries by moderns. Lurcat, Leger, Picasso. Delphic Studios—724 5th Ave. Yovan Radenkovich, painter. Grace Trumbull, sculptor. Drawings by Violetta Flaccus. April 6 through end of month. Downtown Gallery—113 W. 13th St. Kuniyoshi. March 17-April 4. Guild Art Gallery—37 W. 57th St. Don Forbes, A. Gorky, Ney and others. Klee-mann—38 E. 57th St. Albert Sterner. Through April. Julien Levy—602 Madison Ave. American Folk Art. April 1-20. Tchetchew. April 20-May 11. Pierre Matisse—51 E. 57th St. Paintings by the best French moderns. Midtown Galleries—605 Madison Ave. American group including Evergood, Mommer, Sokole, etc. Museum of Modern Art—11 W. 53rd St. Painters as illustrators. April 19-May 10. New Art Circle—Neumann—509 Madison Ave. Work of Klee, Kandinsky, Weber, Kopman. Dorothy Paris—56 W. 53rd St. Oils by David Burliuk, a leading American expressionist. March 30-April 18. Fourth anniversary exhibit. April 20-May 10. Mrs. C. J. Sullivan—57 E. 56th St. Work of the interesting painter, Menkes. March 30-April 11. Ethel Haven. April 20-May 5. Valentine Dudensing—69 E. 57th St. Jean Helion, European exponent of Purism. April 6-20. —J. S.

EASTERN CONVENTION

(Continued from page 2)
and the establishment of a permanent National Art Project.

Discussion will take place on the following subjects: Organization of artists on a trade union basis; report of delegates; the Federal Art Projects, mural, sculpture, easel, teaching and applied art; the Federal Art Bill; Commercial Artists' Organization; Municipal Art Galleries and Centers; Open Air Shows; the Rental Policy; Public and Trade Union Support of Art; Suppression and Censorship of Art and Artists on projects; ART FRONT; etc.

Further and detailed information may be had by writing to the National Organizing Committee, New York Artists' Union, 430 Sixth Avenue, New York City.

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